

The Bighill Creek Project

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The Bighill Creek was once a well known trout fishery in the Bow River watershed. Up until the mid 1960's the stream was stocked annually with rainbow trout. Prior to the rainbow trout stocking program, other species such as brook trout were also planted in the stream.

Through the 1970's, 80's and part of the 1990's, the stream experience some very low flow conditions. These low volumes of water made the stream vulnerable to thermal ranges that were too warm to support a wild trout fishery.

This warm water, combined with agricultural practices upstream of the Town of Cochrane, made the creek a poor habitat for cold water trout species.

Only in the later part of the 1990's did the volume of flow start to increase in the Bighill and with this, migrating trout from the Bow River system started to once again migrate up the Bighill Creek, on the lower reach of the system.

In a 2008 volunteer angling survey conducted by a team of experienced local fly fishermen and led by BVHD, it was discovered that a variety of trout species were present in the lower 7 km reach of the Bighill Creek.

The trout species captured and released in the lower reach were rainbow trout, brown trout and brook trout!

A fisheries study was completed by BVHD in 2009 and for the first time spawning activity by brown trout and brook trout was documented in the fall of 2008, within and just upstream of the Town of Cochrane.

The study findings also showed a successful incubation of the trout eggs, when newly hatch trout were captured in the early spring of 2009, below the 2008 spawning sites. Juvenile trout were also trapped and documented in a few small feeder spring creeks within the Town limits of Cochrane.

Why is there only trout on the lower reach of Bighill Creek? One of the most obvious answers to this question is the fact that on all three properties, including the Town of Cochrane, there is good riparian habitat and a number of cold water feeder springs that enter the creek along this reach.

Also very important in this hypothesis is the fact that there hasn't been any cattle on these three pieces of land for a number of years. The stream banks are well on their way to recovery and the silt loading is minimal in comparison to areas further up the system, where cattle ranching is still impacting the health of the streams fishery!

It is my hope that some day, the opportunity to improve the waters and stream channel on the middle to upper reach of the Bighill Creek will present itself, until then, we can concentrate on the lower reach of the creek!



Right: Volunteer angler Phil Sheehey fly fishes for trout on a section of the Bighill Creek, during the 2009 angling survey.

Bottom Right: This juvenile trout was captured on a small feeder tributary to the Bighill Creek in July 09.



Above: This was the first recently hatched brook trout captured on Bighill Creek in 2009.



Branches and Banks Organization

The first local organization to start work on improving the health of the Bighill Creek's stream environment is the "Branches and Banks Organization". The primary focus of their efforts have been concentrated on the section of the creek that flows through the Town of Cochrane.

The group first started planting trees along the Bighill Creek in 1996 and since that time they have planted thousands of willows and trees along the stream.



Above: These are some of the first spruce trees that B&B planted along the Bighill Crk.

BVHD first started working with the group in 2009, when together with other volunteers from the Millennium Creek Fly Fishers, a planting of 450 willow cuttings was completed, on a site just upstream of the Town of Cochrane.

Since that 2009 planting, BVHD has been involved in all of the annual B&B tree and willow planting events, in the Town of Cochrane. With a common goal, both organizations can enhance the riparian zone along the Bighill Creek!

In 2010, BVHD inspected the 2009 willow planting site to take a few photos of how the plants were doing. The survival of the planted crop of cuttings had fair quite well and some of the willow plants were near one metre in height.



Above: This is a 2010 photo of one of the willow cuttings that was planted in 2009. You can still see the top of the cutting exposed above the ground, in the photo.

Willow plants are the most preferred riparian cover for stream banks along the creek!



Above: This is one of the 2011 willow planting sites that Branches and Banks completed in June of that year.

Right Photo:

This is a photo of one of the willow plants three months later. Note the multiple branches on this cutting stock!



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